

Revitalising a Job Title: Assistant Lecturer/Instructor

By Selda Sonmez Mansour (Brazil)

New graduates in many disciplines find themselves in the same universal predicament: people will not employ them because they are inexperienced, and to get experience, they first have to find a job. English-language teaching seems to be one of the few areas where experience is not an emphasised prerequisite, as there is a high demand on the profession. In some cases even adequate certification is not a requirement if the job seeker is a native speaker.

Indeed, there is no consensus today as to who is qualified to teach English to speakers of other languages. Native speakers with no background-academic or experiential-are usually preferred over nonnatives with proper training and years of experience in the profession. Being a native speaker is generally taken to be synonymous with being able to teach English.

Among nonnative speakers there is a similar case: anybody who has been exposed to the English language long enough to attain a relatively good command of the language is usually deemed “qualified” to teach it. Especially if that person has studied English language and literature at the undergraduate level, she is considered “highly qualified” in ELT, regardless of whether she has had training in teaching or not. “Those who know can teach” seems to be the current motto in English-language teacher employment, and will remain so until the ELT market worldwide is saturated with teachers.

Inadequate Preparation

Whether native speaker or not, most of these teachers are thrown into the classroom without proper training. At best, they have short training courses that are far from adequate to prepare them for actual teaching situations.

However, my aim is not to show the discrepancies in ELT staff employment. It is true that lack of proper pre-service training remains a major impediment to these teachers for a considerable part of their career. Yet, my argument is that even a properly trained teacher who has completed several courses on various sides of ELT and has-even if for only a few hours-actually taught real students as part of the training programme, will face intense difficulty in becoming a real teacher. The laboratory conditions of the pre-service training, where everything is prearranged for the convenience of the student-teacher and where she teaches at most a few isolated units in a book, are not adequate preparation; they do not prepare her for the hardships of actually becoming the teacher of a class, or rather classes, especially during the first weeks, with the additional responsibilities of the related paperwork and exam preparation, as well as the assessment of students’ papers. There is no longer a trainer who will comment on the work done. The new teacher has not yet developed the skill of self-evaluation; she does not know if she is doing the right thing, or is completely on the wrong side. She could, of course, ask for help from

colleagues, but avoids doing so for two reasons: for one thing, she is now “qualified” and does not want to be considered “incompetent”; also, her colleagues all seem too busy to help.

But help is needed, immensely so. It may come, in the form of in-service training programmes, but too late, and too general. Something else is needed: help from colleagues who have done it before, who understand the anxiety, the “what if” worries of this individual teacher.

Mutual Assistance

A new teacher needs assistance from colleagues, but is, even if only theoretically, expected to assist them, and she is usually given the title “assistant” (lecturer or instructor), though in practice there is no assistance taking place.

My suggestion is to revive this job title, only with the slight difference that the assistance is mutual. The assistant teacher will both assist and be assisted by the experienced teacher. Although this apprenticeship system may have some disadvantages, its successful application will enhance the quality of instruction in ELT programmes, as it will not only provide assistance for inexperienced teachers but will also help create -and maintain-a climate of collegueship and exchange of ideas among the staff.

How will this system work? The name “apprenticeship system” suggests that there will be an expert teacher who will transfer a list of “do’s and don’ts” to the inexperienced teacher, observe and judge the new teacher’s classroom performance, while the latter assumes a passive “spoon-feed me” attitude. However, this would only be a repetition of the usual pre-service training programme, where the student-teacher is expected only to pick up a few tactics in classroom management and use of instructional resources, apply these in the laboratory-like conditions of the class she is doing training-teaching in, and, afterwards, listen to the trainer’s remarks, which are mostly positive-as trainees must not be discouraged, for they will improve later when they really start teaching, anyway.

In the apprenticeship system I envisage, the new teacher will be assigned a mentor well before actual teaching starts. (It would be ideal if a new assistant teacher [AT] could be assigned to assist and observe an experienced teacher [ET] for a semester before she starts teaching, but that is perhaps financially not feasible in most schools.)

The AT will know that the ET is ready to share her experience with the AT. The ET will guide the AT in all matters related to teaching. Even the most basic chores may be troublesome for the AT. She will not know what the students are like. For example, in the training programme she may have taught seventh-grade secondary-school students, a thing in no way similar to teaching freshman students at a university, which she has to do now. The ET first has to provide the AT with information about the students’ background: How good is their English? What language skills do they need most? What level are they expected to reach at the end of a certain course that the AT is going to teach? . . . Then, what teaching resources are available to teachers in this school? How can she use them? How many students is she likely to have in a class? How about office hours? . . . There are many similar matters that the AT needs to know. Experienced

teachers, newly employed in a school, will have no difficulty in finding the answers to these questions, because they will know what to look for. But a new teacher will not.

Then, the AT needs information about the courses she is going to teach. If they are independent courses not taught by other staff members, she needs immense help in course preparation. (And, yes, sometimes novice teachers are given independent courses with no course design laid out beforehand.) The ET should not do the job for the AT but should only guide her as to what should be included in the course and offer helpful advice.

During the first days of actual teaching, the AT should be observed in the class by the ET many times and criticised frankly, though not in a discouraging way. The students' response will not be adequate feedback for the AT, who needs an expert's comments. Before and after each class the two teachers should talk about the AT's expected and actual classroom performance. The ET should not just judge that performance, but rather lead the AT to question her attitude toward students, use of teaching aids, general class management, etc. The AT should be trained to assess her own performance and interpret the students' response effectively.

The AT should also observe the ET's classes and comment on her performance. This will give the two a chance to exchange roles and break the monotony of the relationship. The AT will benefit greatly from seeing the ET at work and comparing the ET's preparations with her actual classroom performance. It is helpful, especially for an inexperienced teacher, to know that nobody is perfect, but that overall performance is what matters.

Especially in exam preparation, the ET's guidance will be of great importance to the AT. (And, yes, again, normally novice teachers are expected to prepare their own exams without any outside help.) In her undergraduate training programme, the AT has been taught what kinds of tests there are, how reliable they are, how test results are interpreted, etc. But she may never have had to prepare an exam before. Now she knows what she has taught but does not know how to test students on what they have been taught. She can prepare questions, but is not sure they will be appropriate. The ET will be able to guide her through all this. Again, the ET should not do the job for the AT, but only offer helpful comments when necessary.

In short, the ET should guide and supervise the AT's work but avoid doing it for her. The ET should be prepared to extend help when necessary, but should not give the AT the impression that she is ready to play "mother goose" for her. The AT should also be ready to assist the ET; as the ET will be allocating some of her normal working hours to helping the AT, the ET will need assistance in her own teaching.

Necessary Precautions

The apprenticeship system is vulnerable to exploitation. Both the AT and the ET may see it as an opportunity to leave some of their work to the other, relying on the informal relationship they are likely to develop. The reverse may also happen. Either the AT or the ET may develop an aggressive or negative attitude toward the other teacher and try to destroy rather than assist her

work. Especially, the ET may assume the “all-knowing expert” role, overcriticising and therefore discouraging the AT.

It is the administration’s duty to make the best match among ATs and ETs, basing the selection on personal characteristics of both teachers, however difficult this might prove.

Conclusion

If carried out successfully, this system will fulfill an important role in teacher development. Learning is a continual process, and teaching, of course, is also a continual process of learning. One can never be a “perfect” teacher. No diploma or certificate is the final proof of one’s eternal competence in teaching. Young or old, experienced or novice, a teacher needs to improve herself continuously if she does not want to become dated and fade away. All teachers, regardless of their age and experience, should be subjected to continual evaluation and training, but more focus is needed for the inexperienced teachers. A newly appointed teacher might be talented and enthusiastic about her job, but she still needs considerable guidance through the initial period of her career. She needs individual help for her individual needs. The best assistance for such teachers will come from their colleagues, who will also benefit from the experience, as they will be in contact with fresh enthusiasm that has recently been trained in a school and exposed to new trends and approaches in the profession. The apprenticeship system will enable both teachers to learn to grow, while it will also function as a vehicle for creating a co-operative spirit among the staff members.